

Phalotris mertensi (false coral snake): Predation

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The false coral snake, *Phalotris mertensi*, is an endemic snake from Brazilian Cerrado (Lema, 1984). It has predominantly fossorial habits, displaying a mimetic pattern of coral snakes, covered with reddish dorsal scales with black apices and white and black cervical collars. This snake has diurnal and nocturnal habits (Lema, 1984; Sawaya et al., 2008), and similar to most reptiles from the Cerrado ecosystem, there is a lack of data on its natural history.

The burrowing owl *Athene cunicularia* is a small bird widely distributed in American continent, inhabiting savannas, deserts and urban areas (Del Hoyo, 1999). It feeds mostly on invertebrates, with less than 10% of its diet consisting of vertebrates (Motta-Junior & Alho, 2000).

Here we describe the predation of *P. mertensi* by the burrowing owl. The predation event occurred at 9:30pm on October 8, 2013, on Santa Bárbara farm (20°09'26"/48°07'51"), in Miguelópolis municipality, São Paulo state, southeastern Brazil. As we drove along an unpaved road, located between a sugarcane plantation and an open grassland area, we observed a pair of burrowing owls with two chicks, less than 1m from the nest or burrow, attacking the snake. When they noticed our presence, the two chicks quickly entered the burrow and the adults flew to a nearby fence (Fig. 1). We found the *P. mertensi* specimen (36.5cm of total body) decapitated (Fig. 2), but still performing serpentine movements. The voucher specimen of *P. mertensi* is deposited in the herpetological collection of the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais state, Brazil, under the label LZV1313S.

There is evidence that species presenting aposematic traits are less preyed-upon by birds (Brodie III, 1993). However this is the second record preyed upon a Burrowing Owl, the first being an *Oxyrophus rhombifer* (Sawaya et al., 2003).

Other species of snakes recorded as prey of *A. cunicularia* are *Bothrops alternatus* (Martins et al., 2003), *Bothrops neuwied pauloensis* (Valdujo & Nogueira, 2000), *Philodryas patagoniensis* and *Chironius sp.* (Vieira & Teixeira, 2008). Nevertheless, sightings of predation events are infrequent and usually accidental, and there are almost certainly other species of snakes preyed upon by this bird. Studies on the diet of these birds have revealed

the occurrence of snakes in their regurgitations (Vieira & Teixeira, 2008). However, it is difficult to identify the content to species level.

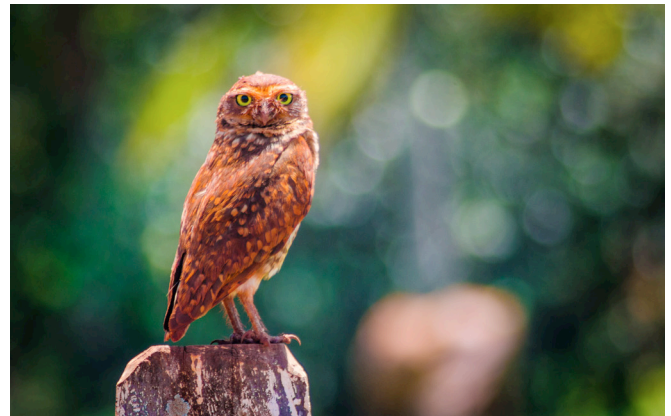


Figure 1: Adult of *Athene cunicularia* that preys on *Phalotris mertensi* in Miguelópolis municipality, São Paulo state, southeastern Brazil. Photo by A. J. R. Cruz



Figure 2: The specimen of *Phalotris mertensi* captured by the burrowing owl, in Miguelópolis municipality, São Paulo state, southeastern Brazil. Photo by A. J. R. Cruz.

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